

Monarch Migration

2018 has been a favorable year for the monarch butterfly, although the population is still very much in jeopardy. According to the Center for Biological Diversity, the area of occupied winter habitat for monarchs is down .43 hectares from 2017. These areas consist of 12 mountaintop regions in central Mexico. Those regions are where 99% of North American monarchs migrate to overwinter every year. In the United States, monarchs have lost 165 million acres of breeding ground over the last twenty years.

While habitat has dramatically decreased, more and more people are getting involved in monarch butterfly conservation. Monarch Watch estimated that in 2017 over 140,000 monarch butterflies were tagged. That is the highest number since the project began in 1992! A large part of this increase is a reflection of public interest in the butterflies. For many, and especially young people, conservation is cool. Recycling, energy efficient cars and saving monarchs are as trendy as pumpkin spice and snapchat.

Monarch tagging and pollinator gardens are popping up as school projects across the country. My Facebook page is full of friends who have brought monarch caterpillars into their homes to nurture and release. Many of our Shawnee County Extension Master Gardeners have done the same. But can being trendy save the monarch butterfly?

We may not know for many years if we can truly save the monarchs. What we do know is that we cannot wait any longer to take action. Individuals and communities can work together to support habitat protection, research and responsible pesticide usage.

- **Pollinator garden:** No matter how small, having pollinator-friendly plants in your garden helps protect all our pollinators. Many of us choose to segregate our gardens into flower, vegetable, pollinator, bird and other designations. Although it's nice to have themes, there's no reason to divide your garden into so many sections. Incorporate milkweed into your flowerbed. Enjoy goldenrod and beebalm as flowering plants while they serve as butterfly food. Plant parsley throughout your beds and enjoy eating it before the swallowtail caterpillars take it to the ground.
- **Track and Tag:** An essential step in conservation is accurate research and data. Help scientists track populations by joining one of the many organizations working to monitor monarch populations. Do you already have a pollinator garden in your yard? Help conservationists monitor monarchs and register it! <https://monarchjointventure.org/get-involved/study-monarchs-citizen-science-opportunities>
- **Use pesticides sparingly and appropriately:** Many pesticides have the potential to be fatal to monarchs and other pollinators. Even organic pesticides can be fatal to beneficial insects. A good pest management program includes monitoring populations when they are small and easy to control. If begin to see a pest problem, call the extension office (785-232-0062) and ask about pesticide alternatives. Always follow all label instructions for any pesticides you use.

- **Support pollinator gardens in your community:** Pollinator gardens are not always what we consider to be traditionally “beautiful” gardens. They may look, to the untrained eye, like patches of weeds and grasses. This is because mowing and cultivation disturbs pollinators. Letting the right plants grow tall and wild helps our pollinators. Before you call to complain about an unsightly area around town, look for signs or other indicators that the area is for pollinators. You may be surprised how many there are! If you haven’t already, visit the registered Monarch Waystations at: The Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, The Shawnee County Extension Office (expanding in 2019), The Shawnee County Extension Master Gardener Native Plant Demonstration Garden at the Governor’s residence and at Lake Shawnee.

For more information on monarch butterflies, including their preferred plants and our demonstration garden locations, visit the Lawn and Garden section of our website: www.shawnee.ksu.edu